FAQ: What guidance exists regarding mask exemption requests for children attending in-person school?

The CDC and AAP note the following situations where face coverings should not be used:

- Children younger than 2 years old.
- Anyone who has trouble breathing or is unconscious.
- Anyone who is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the cloth face covering without assistance.

Beyond these contraindications, the AAP has not provided guidelines regarding specific medical conditions, but rather encourages decisions in the medical home by the primary care physician to evaluate each child on a case-by-case basis in partnership with the family and subspecialist(s).

The AAP has released updated guidance regarding the care of children and youth with special health care needs during the COVID-19 pandemic which includes the following statement:

“Nearly all children and youth with special health care needs (CYSHCN), 2 years and older, can successfully use cloth face coverings that securely cover the nose and mouth. Practice and modeling will increase success. There are few valid medical exceptions. Close contacts of CYSHCN must also use PPE appropriately to limit spread.”

Here are some specific diagnoses to consider:

Asthma: Children with asthma should wear a mask both for the protection of others and themselves. In general, if the child is well enough to be at school from a respiratory and asthma control standpoint, the child should be well enough to wear a mask. If a child develops significant labored breathing (e.g. concern for an asthma attack), the mask should be removed while emergency medical care is pursued or until normal breathing returns.

Airway, breathing, or swallowing problems: Children should not wear a mask who have a chronic condition that could cause a serious life-threatening emergency on a recurring basis that impacts the ability of the child to breathe. This includes but is not limited to: ventilator-assisted breathing, oxygen-assisted breathing, need for airway suction, frequent choking episodes, recurrent apnea, difficulty swallowing that results in an accumulation of secretions that are excessive and potentially requires suctioning, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pulmonary fibrosis, cystic fibrosis, any other serious respiratory compromise, or other medical conditions that impact breathing.

Neuromuscular disorders: Children with disorders that affect their ability to remove their mask independently should not wear a mask.

Developmental or behavioral disorders, mental health disorders, and cognitive impairment: Developmental, behavioral, and mental health disorders may cause it to be difficult for a child to adjust to mask-wearing. In general, as long as the disorder does not affect the child's ability to breathe or remove their own mask, these conditions should not result in mask exemptions. Instead, we recommend working with a therapist and using techniques to help acclimate to the mask prior to return to in-person school. If a behavior therapy approach is not successful, rare circumstances may result in the need for a mask exemption (e.g. children who must be in an in-person setting but who become a danger to themselves or others when mask-wearing is enforced). In this case, a step-wise program should be put in place to increase mask acceptance, with the goal of only temporary exemption and eventual routine mask use.